

81-10057



Approved For Release 2007/05/23 : CIA-RDP06T00412R000200120001-5

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Islam in North Africa: Its Potential as a Revolutionary Force

An Intelligence Assessment

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*PA 81-10057
February 1981*

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Islam in North Africa: Its Potential as a Revolutionary Force

An Intelligence Assessment

*Research for this report was completed
on 31 December 1980.*

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]
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This paper was coordinated with the Directorate of
Operations, the Office of Geographic and Societal
Research, and the National Intelligence Officer for
Near East and South Asia. [redacted]

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*PA 81-10057
February 1981*

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**Islam in North Africa:
Its Potential as a
Revolutionary Force** [REDACTED]

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Key Judgments

The political threat of Islamic fundamentalism to the governments in North Africa appears to be substantially weaker than in many Middle Eastern countries. In Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, Islamic fundamentalism has generally been co-opted as a regime support—or at least tentatively neutralized—by the national leaderships. [REDACTED]

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North Africa's leaders have curtailed the potential of Islam as an antiregime revolutionary force primarily by identifying themselves with salient aspects of North African religious culture. By successfully appropriating Islamic symbolism as an ideological underpinning of their own policies, for example, North African leaders have enhanced their appeal among the region's masses and undercut the ability of potential opponents to acquire legitimacy through Islam. [REDACTED]

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Thus, King Hassan of Morocco has relied on an elaborate set of traditional religious motifs and on his position as spiritual leader of the nation's religious orthodoxy to legitimize his policies. The leaders of Algeria and Libya have enjoyed some success in fashioning nationalist ideologies that combine Islamic puritanism with elements of modern socialism. Tunisian President Bourguiba has pursued avowedly secular modernization policies, but he has couched many of his actions in the rhetoric of traditional Islam. [REDACTED]

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Moreover, compared with some Middle East governing elites, North Africa's leaders have benefited from the region's more gradual and less disruptive modernization, the relative homogeneity of the area's national religious cultures, and the resultant strong sense of communal identity that has contributed to heightened political cohesiveness. [REDACTED]

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In sum, North Africa's leaders may be vulnerable to grievances arising from social and economic factors, but it is unlikely that opposition movements will be able to generate mass unrest primarily on religious grounds. The Tunisian regime, however, seems to be the least secure of the four, insofar as religiously based agitation is concerned. [REDACTED]

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Islam in North Africa: Its Potential as a Revolutionary Force [REDACTED]

The reemergence of Islam as a dynamic factor in international affairs has led to a proliferation of attempts to understand the nature and scope of Islamic fundamentalism and to estimate its likely impact on the politics of Muslim nations. In particular, the Islamic-based revolution in Iran has raised the specter that Islamic fundamentalism might provide the ideology or political vehicle for the overthrow of incumbent regimes in other Muslim nations. [REDACTED]

Islamic Culture in North Africa

The four nations of North Africa—Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya—share a conservative religious orthodoxy and a common-folk religion that distinguish their homogeneous and relatively cohesive religious culture from Islamic culture in other parts of the Middle East. As a consequence, the relatively monolithic Islam of North Africa has acted as an underpinning of political cohesion. This contrasts with the religiously diversified Middle East, where differences both within Islam and between it and other religions frequently serve as focal points for political violence. Islamic resurgence in North African society has been a relatively moderate force, characterized in part by the fact that religious ideology penetrated the region's political and economic spheres aggressively and gained prominence only in the last decade. [REDACTED]

Historically, Islam made two major contributions to the political culture of North Africa. The earliest was that of an integrating force, providing Arab linguistic, ethnic, and social identity to the region's essentially non-Arab population. The residual effects of Arabization—a strong sense of communal identity, generally conservative religious orientation, and rejection of any but Islamic heritage—gave rise to the high degree of conservative religious fervor that prevails throughout the region. Islam also repeatedly succeeded in mobilizing popular sentiment for nationalist political movements, culminating in 20th century independence struggles in all four states which pitted Muslims against foreign colonial powers. [REDACTED]

In the current context, Islamic consciousness has contributed to a strong sense of community—as well as heightened political cohesiveness—in each society, and the region's political leaders have played to these sentiments. Religion is an important basis for regime legitimacy in Morocco, Algeria, and Libya and has constitutional validity even in Tunisia. In all four nations, religion provides the legal foundation for civil law codes. In addition, the ruling elites in all four states have associated themselves with Islamic themes throughout the 1970s. [REDACTED]

As a corollary to their assumption of Islamic credentials, North Africa's leaders have sought to identify themselves with Arab nationalist causes, particularly the Arab struggle to recover Palestine—an issue that in the popular mind has substantial religious overtones. Morocco's King Hassan, for example, was host to an Arab summit conference in 1974 that laid the groundwork for Islamic-bloc UN votes in favor of the Palestine Liberation Organization. He also contributed troops that distinguished themselves in fighting on the Golan heights in the October 1973 war. The King is currently chairman of the Islamic states' Jerusalem Committee. Algeria and Libya have variously belonged to "Steadfastness Front" and "Confrontation State" blocs that have taken rejectionist positions on Palestinian issues, and Libya's Qadhafi has strongly identified his nation with the Palestinian cause. Algerian and Libyan leaders have also enhanced their nationalist credentials on Arab-Israeli matters through their use of oil as a weapon. Tunisia has been the site of Arab League headquarters since its members voted to move out of Cairo to protest Egypt's policy toward Israel. [REDACTED]

Islam as a Political Force

Basic differences in history, leadership, and political processes and institutions among the nations of North Africa create environments in which the political expression and potential of Islam vary considerably. Nonetheless, there appears to be a fundamental

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distinction between the political impact of a resurgent Islam in North Africa and the same force in many Middle Eastern countries. In the Middle East, Islamic fundamentalism has become, or threatens to become, a major rallying point for opposition groups wanting to alter or overthrow incumbent regimes. In North Africa, it has been co-opted as a regime support, or at least tentatively neutralized. [REDACTED]

Several factors account for the weaker political potential of the Islamic revival in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya:

- Modernization and Westernization are decades older, have come more gradually, and thus have had a less disruptive impact than, for example, the changes that have transformed Saudi Arabia in a single generation. North African society has enjoyed the stabilizing influence of entrenched peasant and middle classes—institutions that until recently were absent from societies in the Arabian Peninsula. As a consequence, North African populations appear more amenable to modernization and less likely to gravitate to opposition groups mobilized around traditional values.
- Popular dissatisfaction in North African societies appears generally to be expressed in economic and social terms (for example, demands for more equitable distribution of wealth and for expansion of democratic norms) and not in terms of religious-based discontent.
- Political leaders in North Africa have generally succeeded in projecting themselves as protectors of Islamic values, or at least as no threat to them. [REDACTED]

Political Leadership in the Islamic Context

The degree to which a Muslim political leader is identified with the salient aspects of his society's religious culture appears to be particularly important for assessing the destabilizing potential of Islamic movements. In North Africa, as in other developing societies, most political leaders enjoy only a tenuous hold on the loyalty and obedience of their citizens. They have sought ways to enhance the credibility of their rule and the allegiance that they might command. In the absence of effective rule and tangible accomplishments, they have relied heavily on ideological, largely Islamic,

underpinnings to legitimize their policies. The total fusion of religious and political authority in Islamic society has placed a primarily psychological instrument at the disposal of Muslim politicians that they have used, virtually unchallenged, in North Africa for unabashedly secular objectives. In the contemporary context, a ruler's successful appropriation of religion to his own cause is likely to undercut the ability of opposition movements to acquire legitimacy through Islam. [REDACTED]

Thus, in the context of their social, economic, and ultimately political strategies to transform their countries, North Africa's leaders have pursued strategies rooted in Islam, hoping thereby to refocus such elemental loyalties as religious fervor to their political advantage. They have appropriated religious values in order to create the appearance of a traditional, and hence relatively stable, environment for managing economic reformation. They dominate the religious establishment so that religious opposition groups are largely denied the organizational means to express their demands. [REDACTED]

This course has allowed North Africa's leaders to monopolize Islamic sentiment and outbid potential dissidents who might wish to capitalize on religious activism. To the extent that their tradition-cloaked development strategies have enjoyed relative success, in North Africa at least, identification with and manipulation of Islamic symbols by national leaders apparently serve a preemptive and, hence, stabilizing purpose. [REDACTED]

National Religion in North African Politics

Differences in the political histories of the North African nations have produced distinctive forms of Islamic ideology in the political arena. King Hassan of Morocco relies on an elaborate set of traditional religious motifs and on his position as *imam*—spiritual leader of the nation's religious orthodoxy—to legitimize his policies. The leaders of Algeria and Libya have been relatively successful in fashioning nationalist ideologies that combine Islamic puritanism with elements of modern socialism. Tunisian President Bourguiba has pursued avowedly secular modernization policies, but he has couched many of his actions in the rhetoric of traditional Islam. [REDACTED]

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Morocco. King Hassan has been able to co-opt a complex arrangement of traditional Islamic values and dynastic symbols to legitimize his rule and to overcome the ethnic, class, and economic grievances that plague Moroccan society. He also relies on traditionalism and the affection and fealty that many feel for the monarchy to offset popular dissatisfaction with Morocco's political elite. He continually seeks to mobilize mass support for the monarchy through the manipulation of religious values and by ceaselessly reaffirming direct ties between himself and his people, both in real and in symbolic terms. [REDACTED]

For example, Hassan laid claim to the phosphate-rich Saharan territory in 1975, exploiting the strong popular feeling that the disputed territory was historically part of Morocco. His subsequent dispatch of an army of civilians armed only with copies of the Quran and traditional Islamic standards to consolidate his claims reflects the religious nature of the King's mobilization efforts. [REDACTED]

Hassan also trades on his countrymen's belief in the validity of hereditary attributes to sustain popular support. The descendants of Muhammad through his son-in-law, Ali, have enjoyed a significant advantage in seeking political power throughout the Muslim world because most Muslims consider it a religious duty to venerate them. Hassan's dynasty has ruled in Morocco for 300 years and, by claiming prophetic descent, was able to combine political rule with spiritual legitimacy. The fact that Hassan is also believed to possess *baraka*, the quality of divine grace passed on from Ali to selected, particularly pious, descendants, enhances the mystical regard that thousands of uneducated Moroccans have for the monarchy. [REDACTED]

Algeria. Algeria's ruling elite has attempted to broaden its legitimacy with a carefully orchestrated revival of Islamic culture. Religion in this case is used as an ideology of integration and national solidarity. National leaders try to transcend the country's problems through the use of ideological tools designed both to foster national unity and purpose and to focus popular loyalties on the central authority. Revolutionary nationalism, Islamic orthodoxy, and ethnic consciousness have thus assumed paramount ideological importance in contemporary Algeria. Unlike Morocco and

Tunisia, where precolonial traditions survived largely intact, Algerian traditions derive from modern sources: nascent nationalism, intensive modernization, and militant rejection of Western colonialism. This fact has led the Algerians to attempt to synthesize these modern values with older, religious ones. [REDACTED]

Algeria's leaders stress the Islamic aspect of Algerian identity, and their policies are designed to strengthen religious awareness. They try to enhance popular identification with formalized religion, to promote popular education in Arabic, and to emphasize Islamic ideals in Algerian society. [REDACTED]

Although the national leadership has cloaked its successful revolution with a mythology of continuing revolutionary struggle and attendant sacrifices, Algeria's nationalist ideology is rooted in an Islamic variant of socialism that stresses economic transformation as the basis of national independence.

Boumediene, giving priority to massive industrialization projects and to fostering a small, proficient modern sector to run them, developed the theme of Islamic socialism to assuage popular expectations during a time of government-promoted austerity. According to Boumediene, massive industrialization would foster development in a way that would eventually allow a Quranically sanctioned equitable distribution of wealth within Algerian society and prevent any one class from monopolizing it. [REDACTED]

Tunisia. Unlike other North African leaders who have emphasized religious values in their political strategies in different degrees, Tunisia's leaders have systematically sought to minimize the role of religion in politics. They have tried to divert popular attention from traditional attachments toward such modern values as national integration and social development—probably with more success than their counterparts in the region. Upon his accession to power in 1956, Bourguiba promulgated a secular civil code, and he remains the only Arab leader to have such a thoroughly secularized legal system. The President has also encouraged the abandoning of traditional values—as in the matter of attire for men and women—which he believes retarded the regime's modernization efforts. [REDACTED]

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Even Bourguiba, however, has had to resort to the use of religious symbols to promote his modernizing policies. His civil law code does not entirely abandon the spirit of Islamic law. In attempting to justify abolition of the month-long Muslim fast of Ramadan—with its attendant decline in productivity—Bourguiba was unable to impose his reinterpretation of religious law. Because a Muslim is allowed to break the fast if he is engaged in a *jihad*—or struggle to promote Islam—Bourguiba as early as 1960 argued that the struggle to achieve economic independence through modernization was comparable to a *jihad*. He failed to obtain the support of Tunisia's religious authorities, however, and was eventually compelled to retreat from his position.

Nonetheless, Bourguiba established at least a veneer of secular modernism and created a secular-oriented elite and middle class that seem to make Tunisian society relatively immune, at least for now, to the destabilizing potential of Islamic fundamentalism. Unrest generated by a bitter or prolonged succession struggle, however, could trigger Islamic-based activism, given the association of intensive secularization with the Bourguiba regime and accompanying labor unrest.

Libya. Libyan leader Qadhafi has systematically invoked religious and Arab nationalist symbols in his mobilizing efforts. Libyan society is more backward, more tribally oriented, and more particularistic than societies elsewhere in the region, and Qadhafi's methods have been more drastic and more demagogic than those of other North African leaders. Qadhafi has reinterpreted traditional notions of Islam and tribal solidarity, which are strongly rooted in Libyan society, and he has broadened the context in which Libyans are supposed to perceive these values. Qadhafi stresses strict religious orthodoxy in an effort to supplant popular attachment to desert brotherhoods and to the worship of local saints.¹ He frequently emphasizes the

¹Prerevolutionary Libya was ruled by the head of the Sanusiyya, a religious brotherhood with lodges located throughout the eastern half of the country and closely linked to the tribal structure and values. Although undoubtedly ignorant of Islamic doctrine and lax in observance, Libya's nomads nevertheless held a deep-rooted Islamic identity, bolstered by their belief in the sainthood of the Sanusi leaders. This arrangement transcended the scope of tribal society and permitted a degree of centralized and hierarchical authority that was a significant force in founding the post-World War II Libyan state. Although the background of Libya's revolutionary leaders reflects these same values, Qadhafi views the brotherhoods as both reactionary and potentially subversive.

Quran's basic doctrine of social justice as a means of promoting his revolutionary goals, and he projects a strong image of personal piety and religious rectitude.

Qadhafi has elaborated and formalized his revolutionary ideology into a set of principles he calls the Third International Theory.² This theory is supposed to constitute an Islamic-based alternative to what Qadhafi considers the degenerate ideologies of capitalism and Communism. He cites passages from the Quran to support the various precepts of the theory, in essence applying religion to suit modernizing values. The theory is comprehensive in that it addresses political, economic, religious, and social aspects of life. Within these categories, Qadhafi calls for direct legislative and executive democracy through People's Committees. He also advocates Islamic socialism, including abolition of class differences, religion as the source of all social values, and a social order rooted in Islam and Arab nationalism.

The Third International Theory provides an ideological basis for Qadhafi's political legitimacy. In it, the Libyan regime is presented as more Islamic, more Arab nationalist, and at once more democratic and more socialist than any other government.

Outlook

The effect of Islamic fundamentalism on the governing capacity of North Africa's leaders may be altered by unforeseen events. Nonetheless, the initial appearance of similarity between the political potential of Islam in North Africa and, for example, in Iran pales in the light of the relatively benevolent nature of North African authoritarianism, its more gradual social and economic modernization, its more established middle class, and its relative lack of religious ferment. Moreover, North African society lacks the entrenched political militancy of the Iranian clergy, and North African leaders have enjoyed a degree of success in incorporating Islamic symbols into their national ideologies.

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North Africa's leaders may be vulnerable to grievances arising out of social and economic disparities in their societies, but it seems unlikely that opposition movements will be able to outbid them in Islamic terms or to generate mass unrest primarily on religious grounds.

[redacted]

All four ruling elites have used Islamic symbolism skillfully for their own purposes and appear capable of limiting Islamic-based ideological gains by opposition forces. They appear to have mobilized mass support for national policies—or at least for themselves as national leaders—as well as to have diverted mass attention from potential opponents. [redacted]

In Morocco, for example, King Hassan is spiritual heir to a generally accepted political and religious system that has existed continuously since at least the 15th century. He is closely allied to Morocco's religious establishment, and mass religious organizations are dominated by the royal house. [redacted]

In Algeria and Libya, Islam is part of a continuing revolutionary momentum that also stresses secular modernization and mass mobilization in pursuit of Islamic and development goals. These two regimes seem to have been successful in combining secular and religious elements and, at least initially, in enlisting popular support of these terms. In Algeria, in particular, significant economic development has been achieved in a relatively controlled environment that has helped to minimize social conflict. A spectacular oil income has served both to underwrite Libyan experiments in revolutionary fundamentalism and to insulate popular attention, while regime strategies have concentrated on focusing mass support on a radical, pious national leader. [redacted]

Islamic fundamentalism has greater potential as a destabilizing force in Tunisia than elsewhere in the region since the depth of secularization is impossible to judge. The vitality of Bourguibism—Tunisia's modern nationalist synthesis—appears to be steadily eroding in the face of economic problems and labor unrest. A struggle to succeed the aging leader, coupled with the elite's record on intensive secularization, may combine to make Islamic activism more likely in Tunisia than elsewhere in North Africa. Nonetheless, even here a threat to the regime is more likely to originate in nonreligious circles than from Islamic revivalists. [redacted]

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